Book Review

Norie Neumark, Ross Gibson & Theo van Leeuwen (Eds.): VØ1CE. Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press. 2010.

Ansa Lønstrup

The creation of this book could be the very ideal or provide a role model for the production of an excellent anthology, even though it was written by 21 authors in 19 very different articles ("chapters"): it examines a clear cut field and focuses on the voice under digital conditions; it is well structured and well composed; it displays a great variety concerning topics, writing styles and genres, such as essays, historical and theoretical-analytical chapters, practical reports, meditations and one poem; and it is extremely well edited, with a thorough, ear-opening and highly reflective opening (Introduction: The Paradox of Voice by Norie Neumark), and with short introductions to each of the four sections of the book: I. Capturing VOICE; II. Performing VOICE; III. Reanimating VOICE; and IV. At the Human Limits of VOICE.

Maybe the most important by this book is the way it transgresses many traditional borders of the professional academic and cultural landscape through a setup with authors from many different research and study areas, like media and communication, media and contemporary art, art history, anthropology, history, cultural studies, and also including voice and sound artists and designers, film makers, curators and critics and other practitioners in the field. This diversity establishes a productive and real interdisciplinary "playing through" of the digital voice and its preconditions or predecessors, which makes the reading varied, surprising and even entertaining. The reading could be described as a kind of listening to very different "voices" about the digitalised voice, what also might be experienced as a "polyphonic" or disrupted discourse for some readers. But this will pay out in the end!

The *voice* has been under scrutiny and the topic of discussions in different contexts for some years (Mladen Dolar, Steven Connor, Rick Altman, Kaja Silverman to name a few), often inspired and informed by Roland Barthes´ famous and groundbreaking essay "The Grain of the Voice" (1977). Barthes is also very much present in many of the chapters of the book. But since this is the first book to treat and investigate what happens with the voice in the digital era, it foremost draws on different empirical features and phenomena of contemporary or recent date.

Still, many of the chapters are based on the shift from analogue to digital, inside specific practice fields, showing how the digital voice was already historically implied or "prepared" in earlier techniques, performances and practices. Theo van Leeuwen opens up with a historical report about Vox Humana: The Instrumental Representation of the Human Voice; Thomas Y. Levin reveals in his Before the Beep: A Short History of Voice Mail that it was the Danish engineer Valdemar Poulsen who invented the answering machine as early as in 1898! Virginia Madsen and John Potts take up the rather new (2005) technology and voice practice in the article Voice-Cast: The Distribution of the Voice via Podcasting, which reveals the very central role that the voice has got through the timeshifting and *mobile* technology of the iPod. Furthermore this first section of the book (Capturing VOICE) consists of a biographical re-enactment or "art essay", Four Rooms, by Theresa M. Senft. It is based on the famous voice piece by Alvin Lucier, "I Am Sitting in a Room" (1981), where he enacts and re-enacts his own stuttering voice, playing it over again and again until the resonance of the room masks and destroys any decoding or semblance of his speech. And last but not least, this Capturing VOICE section is ended by Martin Thomas' The Crackle of the Wire: Media, Digitization, and the Voicing of Aboriginal Languages, in which he describes how the new digital technologies have made possible an interaction of still living aboriginal people with the "dead", but by anthropologists' recorded voices of their forefathers and their earlier voice life practices.

This last historical chapter of the "capturing the voice" section might be an explication of the fact that there seems to be a very strong sound and voice research and study group in Australia and Sydney, where this book and its editors originate from. The notion of the aboriginal *songlines* comes into mind when seeking an explanation for this well established and advanced Australian research in the field of sound and voice.

In the section Performing VOICE, which also include chapters about Performativity and Voice (Norie Neumark), Voice, Dance and the "Predigital" (Meredith Morse), Vocal Textures (Amanda Stewart), and a poem by Mark Amerika, it seems obvious though in this review to focus on Brandon LaBelle's Raw Orality: Sound Poetry and Live Bodies, which establishes itself as the central theoretical chapter of the book. In many ways – together with Norie Neumark's Introduction – it frames the many chapters and their different aspects of the voice together in an overall thesis about the voice before and after the digital conditions, drawn inductively out of the history of the so-called Sound Poetry, but informed by a broad and basic theoretical discussion of the character and status of the voice before and after:

before (the digital) it was still working and treated as attached to the self, to subjectivity and to authenticity. The avant-garde Sound Poetry in the 50s and 60s, with its "lettrism", "glossalolic" babbling, and fonetrism, tried to re-establish the "primal voice" of the body without and before the tyranny of language as signification and semantics. Now the artistic-social practices of digital voice on the Internet and in installations has left this "primal body voice" project for the sake of a common, social and "trembling" or ruptured interaction of the many interweaving and collective voices composing "polyphonic" or noisy voices. This practice is in fact the ground condition of every voice under the digital condition. Since everybody's voice can be digitally duplicated, reformatted, decomposed and re-enacted, the notion of the voice as related to the authentic body or to the self has been left for a nomadic, composed, dynamic and "informed" voice under continuous creation and genesis.

In light of this chapter, the reading of the following more empirical chapters of the third section, Reanimating VOICE, will be not only a pleasure, but will also serve to exemplify the reflections and theorising of LaBelle's chapter. The third section contains: Ross Gibson, about the voice in digitally designed music, such as Jamaican Dub; Isabelle Arvers: Cheats or Glitch?: Voice as a Game Modification in Machinima; Helen Macallan /Andrew Plain about Filmic Voices; Mark Ward's Voice, Videogames, and the Technologies of Immersion; and finally, Axel Stockburger: The Play of The Voice: The Role of the Voice in Contemporary Video and Computer Games. Most of the phenomena covered here were rather unknown to me, and the chapters therefore very informative. Unfortunately I made the mistake of not reading the central LaBelle chapter before these empirical and mostly descriptive chapters, and therefore in my first reading, I unjustifiably missed some of the more methodological angles or critical aspects to complement the much informative and newscharacter of this section.

In the fourth and last section, At the Human Limits of VOICE, we are led through a very beautiful "meditation" by Michael Taussig, Humming, which articulates this primal voice activity as the possible voice origin of all creatures, to a most interesting chapter by Nermin Saybasili, "Digital Ghost": Voice and Migratory Hauntings about contemporary and international art installations performing (documenting) the growing globalised immigrants and their digital diasporic space, wherein they seek to establish their "voices" and identities under their displaced and ruptured conditions. Giselle Beiguelman writes about the Frankensteinian threat of the mechanical voice in Media Voices: Beyond Talking Heads, and about new art works that go beyond that threat in no longer humanising the computer voice, but in "voicing" everything: a room, for instance, or a book. This seems in line with Don Ihde's notion of voice as "the sound of all things" as defined in his book Listening and Voice (1976/2008) – which by the way is the only important title that I miss in the references and theoretical framework of this book.

Voice as the "breath of life and death" introduces the very last chapter by Philip Brophy, Vocalizing the Posthuman, which otherwise deals with the robotic voices in music that are not intended to sound human, but rather robotic. In the introduction to this chapter, Norie

Neumark writes: "Thus the book ends with the opposite of what it started out with, having moved from mechanical voice articulating a humanist discourse of the "human" to a "post-human" human voice stripped of the qualities traditionally associated with that discourse" (p. 304). This bears witness to the breadth of this book, but also about the avoidance of an elsewhere dominating traditional way of treating the voice only as an ideological, humanist phenomenon. This is not the case here – and that opens up the Voice as a research subject and study object for a broad and interdisciplinary group of researchers, students and practitioners.

Do read this book, which in an excellent way opens up the study and understanding of voice under digital conditions in media, arts, and culture. But be prepared that the reading will demand your ability to "listen" when reading at varying frequencies and to shifting and sometimes somewhat noisy "voices".

Ansa Lønstrup
Associate Professor
Department of Aesthetics and Communication
Aarhus University, Denmark
aekal@hum.au.dk